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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/06/2017  
TAGS: [KDEM](#) [KIRF](#) [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [EAID](#) [NU](#)  
SUBJECT: MISKITO COMMUNITY COMMITTED BUT FRACTURED

REF: A. 2006 MANAGUA 02441  
[1](#)B. MANAGUA 00268  
[1](#)C. MANAGUA 00334

Classified By: Classified by Ambassador P. Trivelli for reasons 1.4b

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Poloff talked with political and civil society leaders in Puerto Cabezas, Northern Autonomous Region (RAAN) about the situation there and their views on the Ortega Administration. Leaders of the Moravian church, the historical bedrock of the indigenous Miskito community, admitted the church is weak, leaving pastors and parishioners vulnerable to Sandinista influence. Miskitos insist that YATAMA leader Brooklyn Rivera works as a "hatchet man" for Ortega, but they lack the coordination and resources to oust him from power. Miskitos may lose their right to democratically elect their leaders if Rivera succeeds in amending the law of autonomy for the Atlantic Coast. Despite Ortega's election campaign promises of peace and reconciliation, non-Sandinista Miskitos face mounting economic and social discrimination. These non-Sandinista forces seek our assistance in forming a coordinating committee composed of Miskito political and civil society organizations to define a common vision and priorities and fund specific programs developed to achieve these priorities. Without assistance, the Miskito community will remain divided, leaving it vulnerable to the Sandinistas' aggressive efforts to win hearts and minds in the region. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (C) On February 2-3, poloff visited Puerto Cabezas RAAN to meet with political and civil society leaders to discuss their views on the opportunities and challenges presented by the Ortega Administration. During the visit, poloff met with the newly-elected Superintendent of the Moravian Church; leaders of the YATAMA No-Sandinista movement; several interfaith religious leaders forming an indigenous advisory committee; representatives from the Council of Elders; a splinter group of women from the indigenous women's organization AMICA who have aligned themselves with YATAMA No-Sandinista; representatives of YATAMA President and National Assembly deputy Brooklyn Rivera; and, leaders from the indigenous political party PAMUC. While each group talked of their particular needs, a number of common themes emerged which could help unify the indigenous communities.

Moravian Church on the Decline  
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[1](#)3. (C) According to Cora Antonia, the first-ever woman elected as Superintendent of the Moravian Church, the church has been on the decline since the Sandinistas came to power in 1979. Prior to 1979, the church ran a seminary, a nursing

school, two hospitals, and several schools. Never wealthy, the church provided the communities with spiritual guidance, education, and health services. It formed the core of the Miskito community and was important in protecting and maintaining Miskito culture. Antonia revealed that the situation has changed. The church faces growing pressure from pastors and parishioners to provide material assistance that the church is unable to provide.

¶4. (C) Although Antonia affirmed that the church is "open to all, both YATAMA and Sandinistas", she admitted that she and other church and community leaders are "worried about changes, given our past experience" and that "we must analyze Ortega's true intentions." She cited Ortega's recent attempt to change the National seal as a "bad sign of the President's behavior" that "makes the population fear him." Despite this wariness, the church's limited effectiveness in recent years to help the communities is forcing the communities to look elsewhere for assistance.

¶5. (C) Of particular concern to Antonia are the church's pastors. They are extremely influential in the communities, but their poverty -- pastors earn just 350 Cordobas (\$19 dollars) per month -- and lack of political astuteness may make them vulnerable to influence. Working through the pastors, she believes, the Sandinistas could gain the confidence of the communities, overcoming their natural skepticism (Ref. A). To counter this, she highlighted the need for better salaries and specific training on the electoral process with emphasis on civic responsibilities / participation and ethics. (Comment: If the Sandinistas employ the Moravian pastors as a tool to increase their influence in the communities, opposition parties could lose more ground to the Sandinistas in the 2008 municipal elections. End Comment).

¶6. (C) To combat the challenges facing the Moravian church and the Miskito communities, Antonia is formulating a five-point plan focusing on communication, administration, social programs, education, and inter-gender / generation relations. Because so many Miskito communities are isolated, Antonia hopes to first create a church newsletter -- written in native languages -- that would deliver unified news and information and act as a counterweight to the local activities of the Sandinistas.

#### YATAMA Leader Without Support

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¶7. (C) There was universal agreement among the Miskito leaders that YATAMA President Brooklyn Rivera does not represent the will of the Miskito people. They believe he struck a deal with the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) and Daniel Ortega to stay in power and now works as a "hatchet man" for Ortega. They insisted that Rivera is a traitor and the biggest threat to the Miskito community. Despite this widespread discontent, the Miskito community has not been able to move him from power. According to YATAMA bi-laws, a sitting president can only be removed by the majority vote of a General Assembly. However, the Miskitos have not been able to convene a General Assembly due to lack of inter-community coordination and financial resources. Until Brooklyn is removed, leaders insisted, little can be done to stop the influx of Sandinista money and influence.

#### Liberal Supporters Black-Listed

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¶8. (C) Since the elections, Rivera has publicly threatened opposition leader Osorno Coleman ("Comandante Blas") (Ref. B) and repeatedly warned people who voted for the Liberal opposition parties that "their time is coming." Leaders reported that Rivera has publicly promised to channel government and NGO support and programs to FSLN supporters, creating fear and confusion in the Miskito communities. Further, it appears that Brooklyn has created a "black list" of people who voted for the opposition. People on the list cannot get government jobs, qualify for loans or

scholarships, or get jobs with FSLN-aligned private businesses in the communities. Opposition supporters have also been ostracized and excluded in neighborhoods and communities.

#### Law 28 Reforms - Undermines Democratic Elections

¶9. (C) As a National Assembly deputy, Rivera also reportedly seeks to amend Law 28, the law that defines the terms of the RAAN's autonomy. According to Miskito leaders, Rivera is coordinating an effort with FSLN supporters in the RAAN to introduce legislation that would eliminate popular elections.

Instead, insisted the leaders, pre-selected candidates would be put before a General Assembly only for the purpose of ratification. Leaders believe Rivera is trying to justify this subversion of democracy under the guise of the Miskito's traditional practice of convening popular assemblies to vote on issues affecting the community. If this legislation is introduced, stressed the leaders, support from the Liberal parties will be critical to defeat the measure.

#### Opposition Skeptical of Sandinista Promises, but Offers Little

¶10. (C) In light of Ortega and the Sandinistas' history in the RAAN, there was unanimous skepticism among the various leaders that Ortega will be able to fulfill his election promises. Instead, they suspect that programs and support -- as Rivera has announced -- will be strategically targeted at FSLN supporters and key influencers in the communities, including former Contra fighters, to maximize the political and public relations impact. Leaders acknowledged that "assistance is assistance," but believe the FSLN's intentions are disingenuous, designed only to win enough support to tip the scales in the FSLN's favor in 2008 municipal elections.

¶11. (C) Miskito leaders begrudgingly admitted, however, that while they are skeptical and critical of the FSLN and Rivera's offers of support, they have little to offer their communities aside from anti-Sandinista rhetoric emphasizing the atrocities of the past. They understand that they must counter-balance the Sandinistas with programs and support of their own, but complained that they lack the robust social infrastructure of the Sandinistas vis-a-vis a network of NGOs and community organizations. With a Sandinista government now in power that has a declared intention to help FSLN supporters, leaders lamented that they will fall even further behind in the race to win hearts and minds in the RAAN.

#### Battle for Identity Within YATAMA

¶12. (C) Given the damage inflicted on the RAAN by Rivera, leaders expressed a strong desire to disassociate from him either by forming a new indigenous movement or by expelling him from YATAMA. Many of the Miskito leaders favored the formation of a new movement. Poloff mentioned that forming a new movement poses two immediate problems. First, doing so does not remove Rivera from his official position as the leader of YATAMA, but simply creates a competing organization. Second, YATAMA has universal name recognition in the RAAN. A new movement would have to create name awareness which, even in the best of circumstances takes time, good communications, and resources, none of which the YATAMA No-Sandinista movement has. Further, Rivera -- through his alliance with Ortega -- would certainly stir up strong resistance to such an effort. Instead, poloff suggested creating an integrated plan that unites the factions of the YATAMA No-Sandinista movement around a common goal of convening a General Assembly to elect new YATAMA leadership. Removing Rivera from YATAMA would rob Ortega of his most valuable ally in the RAAN and could impede Ortega's aspirations in the region.

#### YATAMA in Lock-Step with Ortega Government

¶13. (C) Rivera's representatives were keenly aware of the resistance and resentment among the Miskito people towards Rivera and the FSLN, but believe it stems from fear of change and lack of understanding. Upon aligning itself with the FSLN, they explained, YATAMA proposed -- and the FSLN accepted -- a 17-point plan to help the region. They insisted that the alliance will continue only as long as the FSLN complies with its obligations under the plan. The plan's key initiatives include:

- election of one national deputy and one regional deputy to the National Assembly and one deputy to the Central American Parliament (Note: This objective was accomplished. End Note);
- continuing with property demarcation and titling of indigenous lands (Ref. C);
- payment of indemnities in the Rio Coco area for losses caused by the Sandinistas in the 1980s (Ref. B);
- resolution of a case before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights that prohibited YATAMA participation in the 2000 elections as well as electoral reforms; and
- reform of Law 28 in support of candidate approval by General Assembly;

Montealegre Continues to Ignore RAAN

¶14. (C) While YATAMA and the FSLN are moving forward on a common strategy, the YATAMA No-Sandinista leaders complained that they continue to be ignored by the leadership of the Nicaraguan Liberal Alliance (ALN), despite having won 17,000 votes for the ALN in the RAAN in the 2006 presidential elections (Ref. B). Leaders blasted ALN candidate Eduardo Montealegre for never acknowledging their efforts in the RAAN on his behalf and opined that he lacks the strength to lead the ALN in the lead-up to the 2008 municipal elections. Poloff suggested that the YATAMA No-Sandinista leadership provide a specific list of "good faith" gestures to Montealegre that would demonstrate his continued commitment to his allies in the RAAN.

Comment - Miskito Risk - Failure to Launch

¶15. (C) Without exception, the leaders of the various anti-Sandinista groups, including the Moravian Superintendent, stressed the need to organize community assemblies to discuss their problems and strategize solutions. With the exception of the inter-faith religious leaders, however, each group did so with the intention of solving its own particular problems -- even though each group used almost identical vocabulary and identified common obstacles to achieving their goals. What they lack is a coordinating committee to identify common problems and develop common solutions. When the idea of such a committee was raised, each group saw the advantage, but thought their organization should take the lead, even though most of the groups have no legal charter, no experience in developing plans or implementing projects, and little understanding of the work and resources required.

¶16. (C) To start, these anti-Sandinista groups must agree to the concept of a coordinating committee, select representatives from their groups, identify a leader, and develop a set of common priorities around which they can begin to formulate a plan. This coordinating committee must include a representative from a legally chartered organization with capacity and experience in project development and execution through which it can eventually implement its strategy. Both the Miskito NGO FURCA and the indigenous government of Karata - established under Nicaraguan law as a parallel structure to the State's municipal government system - are strong candidates. Failure to take these initial steps will result in more of the same -

words without action. The USG can play a strategic role by encouraging these groups to meet, facilitating their initial planning, and funding specific programs and projects within the overall plan. Doing so will promote a democratic counterweight in the RAAN and could help keep the Sandinistas' efforts in check.

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